

A Meeting of Domestic and Liturgical Rites: Joy and Light in Orthodox Christmas

By Nicholas E. Denysenko | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016

How do Eastern Orthodox^[1] Christians observe Christmas? What does it mean for Orthodox people? One method for developing a substantial response to this question is to examine the entire liturgical context of the Christmas season in Orthodoxy and present a theological synthesis. This response might be quite satisfactory and beautiful. The liturgies of Christmas offer a formidable liturgical theology to the attentive observer.

Orthodoxy's investment of gravitas and solemnity in Christmas is manifest by a handful of outstanding liturgical features: a forty-day fasting season precedes Christmas, preparing the faithful to hear the news of the Incarnation of God's Son. An intense, strict fast is observed on Christmas Eve, accentuating the need for awareness, focus, and energy to meet the newborn King. The liturgical cycle of Christmas is full and rich. The proclamation of the Word on the two Sundays before Christmas reintroduces various holy men and women of God to the people, and is elaborated by the hymns. The Sunday before Christmas features the reading of Matthew's genealogy, which proclaims Christ as the fulfillment of God's appointment of holy ones to represent God in and to the world.

But the true liturgical riches arrive with Christmas Eve: the Royal Hours offer an office of scripture, hymns, and psalmody, inaugurating the celebration of Jesus's birth for those who want to hear the Word. The Vespers with the Liturgy of St. Basil appointed for Christmas Eve continues the festal observance, disclosing Jesus as God's only Son who is also the perfect image of the Father, sent into the world to reform the distorted image of God in each person. The hymns include short refrains, enabling the people to sing along. As the day of Christmas Eve concludes, the faithful are permitted a modest Lenten meal before returning to church for the Vigil service, which customarily consists of Great Compline followed by Matins. Finally, on Christmas morning, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated. As with all major church holidays, Orthodox musicians have composed special settings for hymns particular to the Christmas feast.

Thus, a glance at the liturgical ordo for Christmas leaves one with the impression of a great solemnity complete with preparation, saturated with the Word of God, and decorated with musical masterpieces.

In reality, Orthodox pastors confront the same challenges experienced by Western Christians at Christmas. Pastoral appeals for quiet observance, fasting, almsgiving, and an increase in liturgical participation are frustrated by overindulgence in holiday parties and consumerism. The hangovers of rich food and wine cloud minds and rob the faithful of the sharp awareness and attention directed towards the Lord, who is coming. For the faithful Christian who makes an effort, the stress of calculating vacation time and creating a suitable budget for gifts is distracting and can produce anxiety. A stark reality for many Orthodox people in the West is managing family obligations for Christmas. For example, a given family—especially one hosting guests—might be able to attend two liturgies at most, one on Christmas Eve and another on Christmas morning. Or a family might be able to participate in only one Orthodox Christmas liturgy, which brings us from the ideal liturgical theology of Christmas offered by the liturgical cycle to the realities of contemporary popular participation.

As in the West, Orthodoxy boasts a joyful domestic observance of the feast that coheres with the height of the liturgical theology of Christmas. These domestic traditions are marked by regional accents, and for this essay I will refer to examples from the Ukrainian Orthodox tradition, which are highlighted by the Christmas Eve dinner and the tradition of caroling. Joy and light permeate both the liturgical and domestic observances of Christmas, and I will reflect on the relationship between the ideal liturgical theology of Christmas and that held by the people in their popular traditions.

Orthodox Christmas: Christology and Exhortation in a Cosmic Celebration

The hymns appointed for Orthodox Christmas reflect Greek patristic Christology and honor a cosmic celebration of Jesus's birth. The first hymn appointed for Vespers on Christmas Eve identifies Christ as the "Image of the Father" whose birth ends the separation of humanity from communion with God:[\[2\]](#)

Come, let us greatly rejoice in the Lord as we tell of this present mystery. The middle wall of partition has been destroyed; the flaming sword turns back, the cherubim withdraw from the tree of life, and I partake of the delight of Paradise from which I was cast out through disobedience. For the express Image of the Father, the Imprint of His eternity, takes the form of a servant, and without undergoing change He comes forth from a Mother who knew not wedlock. . . . Unto Him let us cry aloud: God born of a virgin, have mercy upon us.

The hymn opening Vespers exhorts the people to be joyful: God is in their midst, and God has restored the communion lost through sin by taking on the form of a servant. The hymn blends the elements of exhortation, wonder, and paradox: the true God becomes a servant, and true to the Greek Christological tradition, God relinquishes none of God's divine nature but assumes the human condition in need of divine mercy. The hymns appointed for the feast tend to return to the Christology of late antique Christianity, referring to the revelation of a Christ who is "Light of Light, Brightness of the Father."[\[3\]](#) This act of God requires an appropriate response from the faithful, and in addition to joy, the Christian community is obliged to offer God a gift:[\[4\]](#)

What shall we offer Thee, O Christ, who for our sakes hast appeared on earth as man? Every creature made by Thee offers Thee thanks. The angels offer Thee a hymn; the heavens a star; the Magi, gifts; the shepherds, their wonder; the earth, its cave; the wilderness, the manger; and we offer Thee a virgin Mother. O pre-eternal God, have mercy on us.

The genius of this particular hymn lies in the layers it creates for gift-giving. The hymn identifies Christ as the gift given for humanity ("who for our sakes" has appeared). But the opening verse challenges the liturgical participants to consider their responses to God's gift of Christ, with the expectation that our response will be to offer our own gift. What, then, are the faithful to offer in exchange for Christ? The hymn offers examples from the gospel narratives of Christmas, referring to creation's accommodations for Christ. The possibilities for practical reflection are almost inexhaustible here. One could certainly begin with the implications of offering God a "virgin mother," an opportunity to reflect on Mary's humility, suffering, and service through participating in God's plan to dwell among us in Christ. Parishes can use this hymn as a tool for reflection for the ordinary person in the pew who is concerned about fulfilling obligations by assembling a gift list for family and friends. Christian faithful are called to participate in a gift-exchange with God, one which is regularly practiced in the Eucharistic Liturgy. Even tepid participation in the Christmas liturgy can awaken the spiritual senses in such a way that the season inspires the faithful to think about how the gift that they offer to God in thanksgiving for Christ might permeate the gifts that they offer one another with Christmas carols and egg nog in front of the

tree.

The People's Theology in Domestic Gatherings

The theological possibilities that I have presented above should be challenged by reality: what happens if there are few present to hear the exhortations of this hymn? How can the invitation to share in the life of God and respond by becoming a giver of gifts reach those for whom Christmas is primarily a domestic celebration? Having established that this is a reality for Orthodox Christianity, I will conclude this essay by pointing to examples of the “people’s faith”—festal traditions that have emerged alongside the liturgical and that offer pastors some relief by demonstrating that the inner message of Christmas is reaching the people who are at home.

Many Orthodox and Greco-Catholic Ukrainians, Slovaks, and Carpatho-Rusyns continue to observe the domestic traditions of the holy supper (“свѣта вечера”), which would presumably take place before the Vigil of Christmas Eve.^[5] The holy supper originated as an agrarian feast of the winter solstice, where families would mark the winter solstice with a feast and perform domestic rituals including religious rites seeking protection from evil spirits and fierce beasts that might threaten the security of the family’s home. After the Christianization of this region, the domestic ritual took on a Christian note, and the evening ritual became a solemn meal honoring the birth of the Savior. The details of the meal constitute a paradox, since Christmas Eve is a strict fast. The foods prepared for the meal adhere to the fundamental fasting rules, but there is often an abundance of food, including fish and dumplings. The environment is festive, more the inauguration of the celebration that reaches its peak on Christmas Day itself.

The Ukrainian tradition literally has hundreds of carols, and dozens of variations on each of them. My presentation does not do justice to the wealth and depth of this tradition, but I offer examples from popular carols to show how the domestic tradition echoes the liturgical by expressing the theology of the feast through vivid imagination.

One of the most popular carols sung by the people, often by memory, is titled “[Бог предвѣчний](#)” (“The Pre-eternal God”). This carol is quite short, so we can present a translation of the entire text:^[6]

The pre-eternal God is born!

Today he has come from heaven, to save and comfort his people, and is glad! (repeated)

He is born in Bethlehem!

The Messiah, our Christ and our God for us all, is born for us! (repeated)

Let us sing: glory to God!

Give honor to the Son of God and our Savior, give him worship! (repeated)

This simple carol has traditional characteristics of a folk song, with the catchy refrains. The brevity of the text suggests simplicity, evident in the exhortations to sing and render glory to the Son of God. The text draws from the attributes of God iterated in numerous liturgical texts by describing God as “before eternity” (предвѣчний). Including this sophisticated word in a simple carol is to invite ordinary people to wonder at the mystery of the Incarnation. In other words, quotidian forms of poetry, verse, and song find new ways of communicating the inner message of Christmas to people in domestic settings.^[7]

Another popular carol from the Ukrainian tradition, “[На йорданській річці](#)” (“At the River Jordan”), imagines Mary, the Mother of God, bathing Jesus in the Jordan before placing him in the manger.^[8] The carol reprises episodes from the Gospel narratives, retelling them in folk motifs. After Mary bathes

Jesus in the Jordan, she wraps him in silk and places him in a manger near gray oxen, who come and breathe on him. Jesus is then placed on an altar, where three angels are flying nearby, with all of the Cherubim singing. Then, the Three Kings come, and they name Jesus, anoint him with myrrh, and give him flowers.

The imagery of the carol is remarkable. Creation stands in wonder at the birth of Jesus, and we all are reminded that this is the God whom the angels and Cherubim praise in song. The carol has strong Eucharistic overtones (with the altar references) while also prefiguring Jesus's death and burial. These themes are neither original nor particularly remarkable, as the Nativity narratives themselves echo the primary story of Jesus's Pascha, but it is the retelling of the story through simple folk motifs and actions without losing the sophistication of the Christmas message itself that is remarkable. The carols impart the same Christology and soteriology expressed by the liturgical hymns, with a different use of images.

Conclusion

Orthodox Christians face the same challenges as the rest of the Christian world with Christmas. The social and domestic demands of the season can drain people of energy, and the reality is that many people will not experience the riches offered through engaging in the complete liturgical cycle. Christmas observance has a strong domestic dimension in the East, and while the forms of that observance differ from their liturgical counterparts, the two are not at odds with one another. Both the liturgical and domestic observances of Christmas express joy and wonder that the God who was before the ages would come and dwell among us, call upon all of creation to come and worship him, and offer God a gift in response to the most precious pearl. The power of the domestic tradition of Christmas should be a source of joy for pastors, because the people have found their own way of honoring the only Son of God that reflects the richness of the liturgical tradition.

[At press time, a rendering of “Бог предвчний” was available on YouTube [here](#) and a rendering of “На йорданській річці” was available on YouTube [here](#).]



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FOOTNOTES

[1] The liturgical and musical practices which I discuss here as “Orthodox” are relevant both to Christians of the Eastern Orthodox Church and to Catholics of the Byzantine Rite.

[2] *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Kallistos Ware and Mother Mary (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1990), 253.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., 254.

[5] The first of the two offices constituting the Christmas Vigil is Great Compline, which is appointed for after dinner. In practice, many families eat the holy supper after the service.

[6] Text taken from *Антологія Української пісні Vol. 1: колядки і щедрівки*, ed. Vasyl Zavitnevych (New York: Ukrainian Orthodox Church, 1967), 354. Translation mine.

[7] An anecdote about the popularity of this carol: in the Ukrainian parish tradition of my youth, it became customary to sing this carol at some time near the very beginning of the Liturgy, once the people had assembled, even though carols are customarily sung afterwards.

[8] Based on the text accompanying the musical setting by Kyrylo Stetsenko in *Antologia*, ed. Zavitnevych, 354.

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